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SUBJECT: ON THE WINGS OF A GOAT: REMOTE PAMIR MOUNTAINS NOT REALIZING
POTENTIAL

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11. (SBU) Summary: The Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region is separated from the rest of Tajikistan by hundreds of kilometers of bad roads and thousands of years of divergent history. Its predominantly Ismaili Shi'a inhabitants have long thought of themselves as distinct from the rest of the country. During the Soviet era the region benefited from massive subsidies from Moscow, but has fallen into neglect since independence. Business leaders complain that Dushanbe hinders Badakhshan's development by preventing the issuance of mining licenses and makes it difficult for tourists to reach the region's spectacular mountains and scenic valleys. Trade with China, a lifeline for both Badakhshan and the country as a whole, is similarly hampered by central government policies. Despite such problems, some areas are showing improvements, including Murghab, high on the eastern Pamir plateau. Much of the development work in Badakhshan has been carried out by the Aga Khan, through a network of charitable and for-profit entities, but some residents expressed frustration with an organization viewed as paternalistic and monopolistic. End summary.

A Region Apart

12. (U) In many ways, the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region -- known to most here by its Russian acronym, GBAO -- is separate from the rest of Tajikistan. Its roughly 218,000 inhabitants are two-thirds Ismaili Shi'a, while the rest of Tajikistan is Sunni. Even GBAO's small Sunni population differs from the rest of the country in that it is predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz. Badakhshan's Pamir ethnic groups speak a number of Eastern Iranian dialects, each endemic to a particular valley, that are for the most part unintelligible to Tajiks elsewhere in the country. During the Soviet period GBAO benefited from Moscow's policy of providing heavy subsidies and other support to regions and ethnic populations deemed to be less advanced. Accordingly, Badakhshan continues to be characterized by relatively high levels of literacy, education, and Russian-language ability.

13. (U) Since Tajikistan's independence, however, the region has drifted into neglect. The most palpable aspect of this is its physical isolation. The drive from Dushanbe to the regional capital, Khorog, takes 14 hours under ideal conditions; more

often than not, however, conditions are anything but ideal. Although on maps the road appears as Tajikistan's major (and in some places, only) east-west artery, for most of its length it is in fact nothing more than a one-lane dirt track clinging perilously to vertical escarpments. The twisted and rusting vehicles occasionally glimpsed in the valleys below -- many of them military transports dating from the civil war -- testify to the hazardousness of the route. Beyond Khorog the road improves somewhat as it climbs onto the 4,000-meter plateaus of eastern GBAO, and many stretches leading up to the Chinese and Kyrgyz borders are fairly well-paved. The improvement is not due to better maintenance, but rather the fact that the region's flatter terrain and lower precipitation have resulted in less erosion.

14. (U) The region is frequently no easier to access by air than it is by land. Though there is ostensibly a daily flight from Dushanbe to Khorog, it is canceled at the least appearance of bad weather because the Antonov-28 flying the route must actually pass through, rather than over, the high peaks leading to Khorog. In places the plane's wings are reportedly within 50 meters of the mountains on either side. During the Soviet era this was reportedly the only route for which pilots received danger pay. The ticketing system for the flight is rudimentary: prospective travelers queue up each morning to see if the flight will take off. If it does not, they return the next morning, and so on. Those who make it onto the flight sometimes have to pay a small consideration to move to the front of the line.

GBAO Suffering From Not-So-Benign Neglect

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15. (U) A constant theme in discussions with business and political leaders in GBAO was the extent to which Dushanbe's policies have hampered the region's economic development. Though some said Dushanbe's policies might reflect a simple lack of interest in a distant and thinly-populated region, most believe the national leadership had deliberately sought to stunt the economic and political autonomy of a historically fractious region. During the 1992-97 civil war GBAO's population was generally aligned with the opposition, and to this day the government sees it as a potential challenge to central authority.

16. (U) According to Buribek Buribekov, head of the Qalam Information Center, an NGO promoting economic and civil society development, Dushanbe officially classifies GBAO as an agricultural region, despite the fact that only 0.2% of the land is arable. In official government statistics, GBAO appears to be relatively self-sufficient, growing 100% of its own potatoes and 70% of its own grain. In fact, however, a great deal of the region's produce is imported from Dushanbe or China. According to Boimahmad Alibakhshov, chairman of the GBAO Small Business Association, precipitation has been declining steadily since the 1960s, so even the 13,000 hectares of arable land are producing progressively smaller yields. (This year's harvests have been an exception due to above-average spring rains. In lower elevations apples and other fruit trees appeared abundant, and wheat was being cultivated in terraced fields as high as 3,300 meters.) Only in meat production is GBAO truly self-sufficient, and meat prices are considerably less than in Dushanbe. Alibakhshov said livestock levels were declining as well, however. During the Soviet period the Pamirs had 30,000 yaks, but the number has since been halved.

17. (SBU) Rather than developing GBAO as an agricultural region -- or, more accurately, failing to develop it at all -- Buribekov and Alibakhshov said the government should be concentrating on two potentially much more lucrative sources of revenue, mining and tourism. Badakhshan's soil contains sizable quantities of gold, silver, tungsten, uranium, nickel, and precious stones such as rubies. Indeed, in the mountains east of Khorog there are mines dating from the first millennium. Instead of developing these resources, however, the government continues to drag its feet on issuing licenses for mineral exploration, especially to international companies, under the premise that Tajikistan's geology is a state secret. Unfortunately, few if any domestic companies have the capital and expertise to mount a profitable mining operation. Although the sector is underdeveloped throughout the country, Badakhshanis believe the government is particularly reluctant to see a profitable mining enterprise in their region. Several interlocutors independently told the story of a Canadian mining company that had spent several years in GBAO building access roads, drilling test mines, and bringing in equipment, only to have its license suddenly revoked by the Tajik government. Although details differed -- some said the company was mining tungsten while others said gold; some placed the mine north of Khorog, others to the east -- the fact that the story was so ubiquitous indicates the extent to which Badakhshanis see Dushanbe as hindering GBAO's development. (Note: In an unprecedented move, the government recently declassified a number of Soviet-era geological studies of the Fon Yaghnob coalfield to the north of Dushanbe, for which the U.S. Trade and Development Agency is funding a feasibility study. The declassification, which had been rejected on numerous occasions over the past year, required the signature of the President himself.)

18. (U) Many in Badakhshan complain that the government in Dushanbe is not concentrating any resources on developing other industries in the region. They note that during and immediately after the Soviet period Khorog hosted a textile mill, a bread factory, a milk processing factory, and a hydropower station. Only the latter remains. Alibakhshov said 90% of the wool produced in GBAO is wasted because there are no facilities for cleaning and processing it. The same is true of hides. While there is Chinese interest in importing wool, phytosanitary restrictions require that it be cleaned before being exported. Much of GBAO's milk is also wasted because there are no means of exporting it. Regional officials say they do not have the funding to promote economic development on their own. As a result of government policies concentrating budget authority at

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the center, 79% of GBAO's revenue comes as subventions from Dushanbe. Private investors see GBAO's numbers as too small to be attractive, Alibakhshov said. For the moment he is working to develop links and markets in Afghanistan.

Trade and Tourism Trickles, Not Torrents

19. (U) Though the economics of industrial development in a region as remote and sparsely populated as GBAO may be questionable, several business and government contacts noted that the central government is failing to make even simple changes that would bring money into the region. Chief among these would be to open the Kulma border crossing with China to more traffic. While Kulma ranks as one of the world's more inaccessible crossings -- at 4,362 meters above sea level, hundreds of kilometers across unimproved roads from Khorog -- it nevertheless represents an economic lifeline for the region and the country. Millions of dollars in Chinese goods, from rice to minivans, pass through each year on their way to bazaars in Khorog, Dushanbe, and other cities. Last summer, however, Kulma

was closed to Tajik citizens entering China. Traders from GBAO who once easily bought goods in Kashgar, China, must now make their way by plane or vehicle to Dushanbe, take one of the twice-weekly flights to Xinjiang's capital Urumqi, then travel overland to Kashgar before returning to Tajikistan. Chinese citizens may continue to pass through Kulma in both directions. Interlocutors in GBAO were not sure why the border rules had changed. Some said it was part of a deliberate effort to hamper the region's economic growth, while others thought Beijing may have made the change during the Olympic games. Either way, most agree it has made trading in a harsh region even more difficult.

¶10. (U) Much of Dushanbe's neglect of GBAO has a "cutting off its nose to spite its face" element to it. As a result of Soviet era transportation links, the vast majority of Tajikistan's trade comes through Uzbekistan, with which it has very poor relations. Shipments are frequently held up due to border closures, changing customs rules, and other difficulties. Officials in GBAO point out that the government should be actively promoting trade links with China rather than hindering them. Not only does this fill markets throughout Tajikistan, but it fills government coffers with customs fees. (Note: The fact that all of Kulma's customs fees go to the central budget also rankles some Badakhshanis. End note.) Alibakhshov said that tourism suffers as well. Kashgar receives some 2.5 million tourists a year, many of them western Europeans interested in Central Asia. Even if only a very small percentage of them were interested in extending their trip into Tajikistan, opening Kulma would increase by several orders of magnitude the number of tourists, and the amount of tourist revenue spent, in the Pamirs. As of mid-September, the Murgab Ecotourism Association had assisted only 72 tourists to the region, according to the center's director Ubaidulla Mamadiev. Tourists are hindered as well by the continuing requirement, a legacy of the USSR, to receive separate permission from the government to enter GBAO.

Problems and Progress on the Plateau

¶11. (U) With 6,000 inhabitants, Murghab is the administrative center of eastern GBAO and the gateway to China and Kyrgyzstan. At upwards of 3,700 meters in altitude, the surrounding land is a vast high desert whose economy depends almost entirely on herding yaks, goats, and sheep. Despite the remoteness and harshness of the climate, there has been evidence of change. The town's market has doubled in size since the previous year, and many of the sellers' stalls are made out of more permanent structures (see reftel). Apples, tomatoes, peppers, and other produce from Kyrgyzstan and China were readily available, at prices only a little higher than in Dushanbe.

¶12. (U) According to Mayor Mairambek Tuichiev, the region still faces immense challenges. Chief among these was the lack of power; the Mayor said the same thing last year (reftel). Murghab's electricity comes from a small hydroelectric station built in 1960. In Tuichiev's words, the plant "does not even

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merit the term hydropower station. It was more like a student project, slapped together over a few weeks one summer." Even if it operated at its rated capacity of 400 kWh, it would be wholly inadequate for Murghab's population, which has more than doubled since 1980. At its best, the plant only operates at 200 to 250 kWh during the spring thaw. In winter it produces less than half that. The lack of power was visible everywhere in Murghab; the town's incandescent bulbs shone so weakly they barely functioned as nightlights. All important functions were performed by private generators, whether diesel or solar-powered. Tuichiev pointed to a small computer monitor on

his desk, noting that it was powered by a Chinese-made solar panel on his roof. He said many of Murghab's citizens use such panels to power light appliances. While he would like to see a new hydropower station constructed and Murghab connected to the national grid, he acknowledged that smaller local solutions were more feasible.

¶13. (SBU) As in much of GBAO, the general theme in Murghab was one of neglect and suspicion by the center. Mayor Tuichiev said his predecessor had been sacked after suggesting that GBAO receive some of the thousands of dollars in fees professional hunters pay to bag endangered Marco Polo sheep. He said he has sought to make quiet changes, such as the expansion of the market, without stirring up trouble. Dushanbe remains wary of eastern GBAO's predominantly Kyrgyz population, and Tuichiev said some worry the border with Kyrgyzstan could be closed if difficulties emerge. Tuichiev said he was in fact selected as mayor because he speaks good Tajiki (he is a former translator of poetry, although he was employed more recently as a roadworker) and was viewed as trustworthy. As a result, the ethnic tensions that characterized the tenure of his predecessor have calmed down.

The Ethnic Question

¶14. (U) The ethnic question is a complicated one in GBAO. In discussions in Khorog and in several towns along the Wakhan corridor bordering Afghanistan, Pamiris expressed a contradictory set of understandings of their own ethnic identity and sense of belonging in Tajikistan. A group of thirty university students in Khorog, when asked to state their ethnicity, unanimously said they were Tajik. In subsequent discussions, however, many of them elaborated how they were different from Tajiks elsewhere in Tajikistan, frequently referring to those outside of Badakhshan as "Tajiks", evidently distinct from "Pamiris." When this distinction was pointed out, some offered the explanation that Pamiris are the "original" Tajiks, speaking ancient and uncorrupted (by Uzbek, Farsi, and Russian) versions of the Tajik language. Regardless of the historical and linguistic merits of this argument, it is evident that there exists a substantial sense of ethnic independence among Pamiris -- a sense that under some circumstances is at odds with an official narrative of ethnic unity promoted in Dushanbe. (Note: Linguists classify Tajik as a western Iranian dialect, along with Farsi and Dari, while the Pamiri languages belong to the eastern Iranian branch of the family, indicating separate but parallel development of the two language families. End note.)

Some Surprising Resentment at Aga Khan

¶15. (SBU) In addition to language, one of the chief aspects separating Pamiris from others in Tajikistan is their Ismaili Shi'a faith and adherence to the Aga Khan. Many Pamiri homes prominently feature portraits of the Aga Khan. The many branches of the Aga Khan Development Network are very active in GBAO, involved in everything from hotel management to power production to relief work to the construction of a huge new university campus in Khorog. Some interlocutors in GBAO, however, expressed some cautiously worded but insistent criticism of the Aga Khan's activities. Buribekov complained that the AKDN has a monopoly on relief and development work in the region, essentially discouraging would be competitors from getting involved. After lavishly praising AKDN's work, Boimahmad Alibakhshov slammed the table with his fist while making the same point, saying that a recent EU program contained

no money for the Pamirs because it was believed the region was being well cared-for by AKDN. Both men hastened to say the work of the Aga Khan was principled and useful, but they complained that the overall approach was paternalistic and top-down and did not address needs that Pamiris themselves felt were important.

Comment: A Short-Sighted Approach

¶16. (SBU) GBAO ranks as one of the more remote regions on earth, and economic development is challenging. Pamiris are unlikely to benefit again from massive subsidies as they did during the Soviet era. Then again, it is also clear that the central government is doing little if anything to develop what potential exists. The Kulma policy is particularly short-sighted, robbing not only the region but the country as a whole of a much-needed source of tourist revenue, customs duties, and Chinese goods. The Pamir transit route offers an important counterweight to the current reliance on Uzbekistan for the majority of Tajikistan's imports, although the completion of the transport corridor from Dushanbe through the city of Gharm to Kyrgyzstan and on to China will be an important step in this direction. The central government is clearly wary about developing a region that recently sought territorial autonomy within Tajikistan. The question is whether a policy of neglect -- or outright obstruction -- will be more successful than one of support in ensuring harmony and economic development not only in GBAO, but the country as a whole. End comment.
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